

SHORT COMMUNICATION

First record of Yellow-bellied Weasel (*Mustela kathiah*) from Buxa Tiger Reserve, West Bengal, India

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ABSTRACT

The first photographic record of Yellow-bellied Weasel (*Mustela kathiah*) a rarely seen small carnivore mammal was obtained from a camera-trap, during January-March 2018 in Buxa Tiger Reserve. During field survey on the monitoring of 'Tigers Co-predators, Prey and Their Habitats' (Phase IV) in Buxa Tiger Reserve (BTR), under NTCA Guidelines the 760 sq. kms. area was divided in 195 grids for setting up camera traps as part of the field study. Data of this nature collected over a longer time span will clarify the distribution habitat preferences, ecological attributes and population status of small carnivore such as the Yellow-bellied Weasel.

KEYWORDS: Yellow-bellied Weasel, *Mustela kathiah*, first record, Cameratrapp, Buxa Tiger Reserve.

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Introduction

Buxa Tiger Reserve is situated in Alipurduar District, West Bengal. It comprises of the entire erstwhile Buxa Forest Division (760 km²). The Reserve lies between latitudes 26°30' and 26°55' N and longitudes 89°20' and 89°55' E. The reserve comprises of three bio-geographic zones-Central Himalaya (2C), Brahammaputa valley (8A) and Lower Gangetic Plains (7B).

Yellow-bellied Weasel is listed as Least Concern in view of its wide distribution, occurrence in a good number in various protected areas, inspite of heavy habitat degradation and intensive use of non-selective hunting methods. Although forest conversion is continuing rapidly in South-east Asia, the main populations of this species are in hill forest, which has markedly lower clearance rates than lowland forests (IUCN 2016). In India it occurs mostly at 1,000-4,000m (Choudhury 1997,1999) and in Bhutan upto 3,800 m (P. Yonzon pers. comm. 2006). It shows some tolerance to degraded habitats, and is usually found over 1,000 m in a range of habitats including montane evergreen forest, scrub and grass-land (Duckworth & Robichaud 2005, Supparatvikorn *et al.* 2012)

Yellow-bellied Weasel (*Mustela kathiah*) is a chocolate brown upper body with sulphur-yellow belly, feet are not pale but slightly whitish, size ranges between 20-29 cm (head body length), 13-18cm (tail length) (Menon, 2014).



Figure 1. Camera trap picture with close-up view of Yellow-bellied Weasel.

Methods & Methodology

Camera Trapping was the primary method during field survey 2017-18 with sign surveys also conducted. The method was primarily used towards carnivore estimation over 760 sq.kms. of forest patches within BTR, each camera station was placed about 1-1.4 km apart from any other, which comprised a pair of cameras facing each other and attached to tree or iron poles along forest road or trails at 45cm above the ground. Cameras were functional for 26 days, during which they were operational 24 hour cycle. Monitoring was done by field team every 4-5 days. The camera trap was set and functional for 26 days. The camera was set at FAP (fast as possible) mode- 1/4 second

fast trigger speeds which allows the camera to capture moving animals before they move beyond the view of the camera.

Result & Discussion

A Yellow-bellied Weasel was camera trapped in the core zone of Chunabhati (Buxa Hills) area under Buxaduar Range, Buxa Tiger Reserve (Fig. 2).

Table 1. Details of picture taken by camera trap method.

Figure	Location	Date	Altitude (ASL)	Time
1	N26.77011, E 89.57741	17/02/2018	1025m	07:05 a.m.

This is the first documented picture and report of this species in this landscape. This small carnivore species like weasel are rarely recorded by typical survey methods,

perhaps due to their small build and skulking behaviour. Their study should be kept in highest priority for specific scientific investigation in the near future for saving this species. The camera trap pictures prove the present of the Yellow-bellied Weasel in BTR. The species was either unrecorded or undocumented in previous surveys of this part of West Bengal. The authors believe this species previously unrecorded because of its low density its nocturnal forest dwelling characteristics reduce its contact with human. Additionally anthropogenic pressure- Humans collecting wood, grass and timber and grazing by livestock, including forest management might influence small carnivore presence. Recommendations are put forward to also maintain a database for species such as Yellow-bellied weasel and other smaller carnivores with monitoring the occurrence of this species over time.

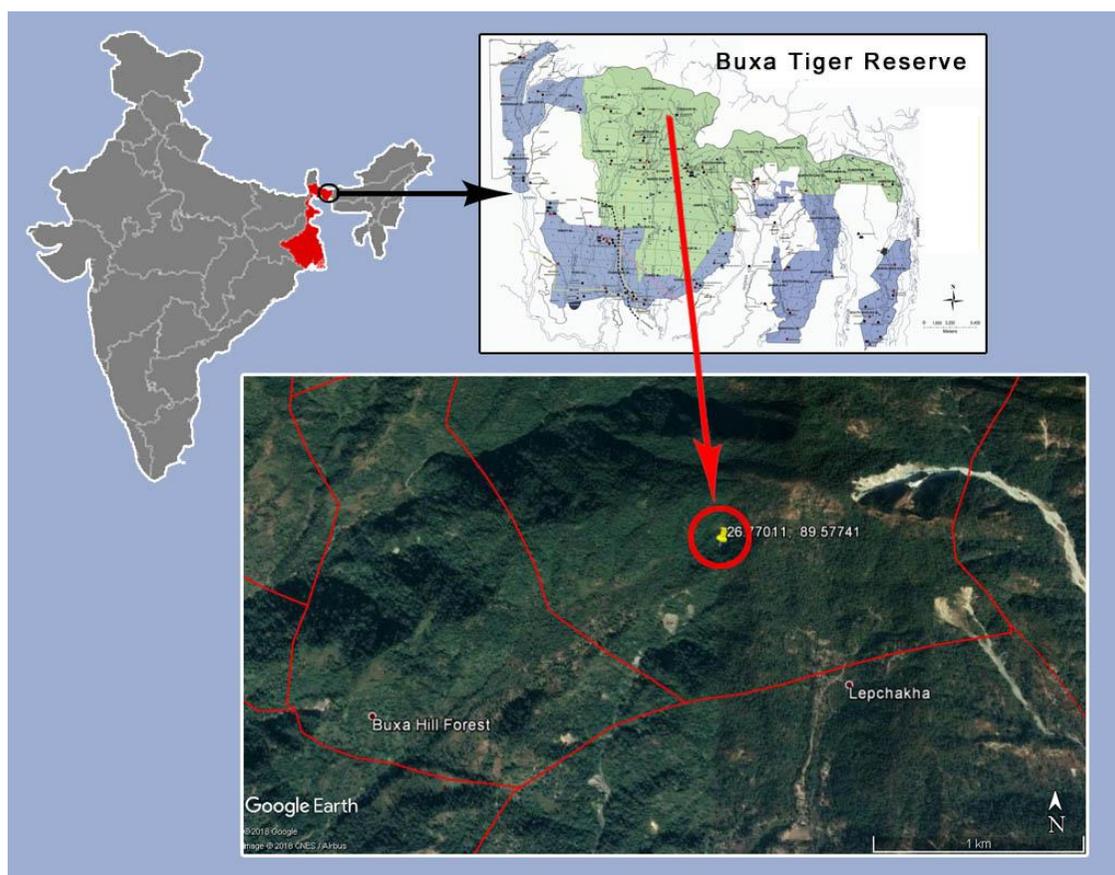


Figure 2. Red circle area in Google Earth Map denotes the point of camera trapped picture and GPS Location of Yellow-bellied Weasel, in relevance to its location at Buxa Tiger Reserve, West Bengal, India.

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